

Memory, Transition and Dialogue: The Cyclic Order of Chin Ce's Oeuvres

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Introduction: Tenors of Transition (*An African Eclipse*)

Beginning with *African Eclipse* (AE) Chin Ce's oeuvres foreshadow a general communal retardation most poignant in the *Koloko* and *Gamji*¹ fictions. Seen together as one movement, Chin Ce's writings trace a movement in the major characters from one of social preoccupation to that of psychological transition in awareness and growth.

'A Farewell' (AE) highlights this movement in a prefatory manner. The three ways: left, right and middle signify three choices involving two extremes and a middle course, an important element in Chin Ce's oeuvres. Before the choice is made, we must face ourselves, our fears, and actions represented in 'only our own graffiti.' The choice of a middle alternative is imperative from the flagellation of the other extremities but it is a lonely route that marks a separation from friends, old values, and life ways. In *Children of Koloko*, Yoyo represents this third factor and his separation from his two friends, Dickie and Buff, finally marks his attainment of growth as we shall see later.

With the choice enacted in full awareness of the sense of

alienation engendered, progress is sure even if the social outcome of this progress in political and social discourse may be uncertain.

'May 29 1999', a historical poem on the inauguration of Nigeria's last democracy confronts us with the grotesque physical paunch and slovenliness of Nigeria's new civilian leadership which combine with poetic epithets to forecast political disaster. 'The curse of the triangle' is another slavery which the new government portends for the generality of the Nigerian people. Ce's cynicism has been justified in the society-evident lack of direction that rated that country one of the most corrupt nations on earth under the government of Olusegun Obasanjo. It is the fraud of nation building which Africa's postcolonial founding fathers had mistaken for patriotism. Its impact on the younger generations to come is being witnessed in contemporary politics of attrition and dislocation of previously honoured traditional values, a situation that Chin Ce forewarns in his second fiction *Gamji College*.

'Second Cousin' continues the dialogue of the younger generation which crystallise in Chin Ce's prose fiction *Children of Koloko*. The Nigerian youth such as 'Hugo, the burly head of the thuggery squad' (*Koloko* 79) has metamorphosed in his 'gold and bangle epaulettes' as the 'success' story of Nigeria's upper social class even with odd jobs to his credit. His sponsors are men who, with the combination of politically motivated murders, extortion, bribery, and corruption have become governors of states or chairs of local municipal councils. Nigeria is consequently in deep political, social, and economic trouble with such fraudulence among the high and low.

'Wind and Storm' furthers the dialogue on the trouble with Nigeria from Achebe's published position on a similar subject.² In this discourse, the poet avers that self-inflicted wounds are no

machination of destiny, especially for a prayerful community which Nigeria has grown into with its deepening Muslim-Christian divide. The consequences of this political malady ('stoked by touts at Government House(s)') are myriad. Environmental degradation ('craters of the Niger') is a corollary of government neglect and paucity of imaginative thinking. ('There are no more sages on silent feet.') Where the instance of leadership exists, there abounds an overstock of quasi-scholarship and religious zealotry.

'The Preacher' satirises a religious environment of pew sanctimony and its failing impact on the sensitivity of the young ones. The timeworn and consequently unimaginative religious dialogue 'let him hear who has ears' begs effective communication with frenzied gestures ('in the crescendo of agitation'.) Since the sermon degenerates to boredom and 'consecrated tedium,' imagination must be given free vent in escape from the stifling environment of religious extravaganzas.

Chin Ce's delineated 'eclipse' is therefore of a postcolonial transition that can only be determined by the quality of both leadership and citizenship in contemporary African republics. The evidence of internal social contradictions and ungainly stirring in the form of political upheavals within the continent naturally justifies the cynicism with which a poet and writer like Chin Ce would draw us to the centre of the African pedagogy.

Song, Drama, and Memory (*Children of Koloko*)

Children of Koloko marks out at initial reading as something of a childhood story of innocence. But it really isn't. What we have are character types seen through the central character, Yoyo, and other bohemian adjuncts of the central personage mainly Dickie and Buff. So we have three youngsters who are negotiating their

passage into adulthood and are keenly aware of the deficiencies of their environment –and of themselves. These are therefore some kind of social critics but not in an aloof, self-righteous manner. They are all participants in a drama of social transition and psychological awareness. The result is a kind of growth. But while the society records painful imperviousness to change, the pace of psychological growth of the hero predictably outmatches all of his contemporaries.

Yoyo is a kind of interrogator engaged in dialogue with society. The first part of the story introduces him as a precocious child prodigy. His imagination is definitely and highly spectroscopic.

Heaven's clouds rolled, beautifully, in a surging mass of flaming bluish tongues.

...

The clouds seemed to surge with greater momentum. Something must be happening too in the ethers, I believed. Each darting tongue of cloud was a bubble of energy flowing in space. I saw them as warriors charging on to battle against Lucifer and his own queer band of angels. I could see how they adorned themselves in grotesque sizes and shapes that kept changing and twisting and bending, now parting, then coming together to become coupled like Siamese cats. I watched calmly as they disappeared behind the veil into the unknown where the band of good angels must be standing on guard. What further threat assailed them by devil's advocates plotting to overthrow heaven and rule? (COK 1)

Coming home was, for him, an exile of, hopefully, a temporary nature.

The journey had not been my picnic, not with the bewilderment and restlessness that I experienced since Mam and Bap and Dora made the preparations for our departure till we all bundled our bulks into the loaded vehicle. Not that I do not like changes as Bap did, for isn't all life full of change, as he would say. For me Boko was the only memorable event like any other place where one had grown up and got used to. So Boko had been home, if home was the house you lived and the community you had grown in, attending school each morning and picking up your habits for over fifteen years until suddenly they said a new state was born and we had become strangers there.(9)

But he adjusts quickly to his new environment thanks to two friends he had quickly taken to and who provide him with fillers in his awareness and understanding of his new environment.

'I am Dickie.'

'And this is Buff,' they introduced in the manner of another dress rehearsal.

'People used to think we are twins,' Dickie said, 'and this loafer, Buff, is always flattered,' he teased.

They must be such fine clowns, I concluded.

Dickie was a gaunt fellow with high cheekbones and wan smile that disguised his good sense of drama. But Buff was a podgy guy who would never look strict or serious with anything even from a distance.

'Let's go and spend some time at De Mica's palm wine bar at the town square,' Buff proffered. 'I'll pay.' (15)

Through Dickie and Buff Yoyo learns a great deal about the backwardness and homelessness situation of this African

neighbourhood called Koloko.

'Do you really believe that Dogkiller has seventeen wives and, over thirty-five sons and daughters' I asked Buff who only gave me a mysterious snort without an answer.

'Dickie, could this be true?' I protested. 'I mean how does he manage them?'

Dickie loudly snorted too and whispered, 'How can I tell? I've never been near his New Heaven mansion.'

'I have,' quipped Buff. 'Such lavish edifice. Greater than any one ten of the chiefs' put together. And as large as heaven too,' he added, 'if you have been to heaven?' he rhetoricised. (21)

Yoyo dilates quite understandably between outright rejection of the generation of his fathers and leaders such as Dogomotun and Fathead and the vicarious enjoyment of the spoils of national plunder seen in his participation in Fathead's 'house warming' ceremony. Later in 'Koloko News' we see him defending the public ridicule of his society which the likes of chief Dogkiller, the politician, had visited on it by his misappropriations of public resources.

The quality of a dramatic short fiction in *Children of Koloko* comes with its spontaneity of progression via the impetus of discourse a salient and unique quality in the writings of Chin Ce as in 'The Bottle' (*Gamji College* 2001). This interaction of dialogue and songs serves to convey deep social entrenchments such as the public song at chief Fathead's house warming ceremony:

When we eat, when we drink
Wine, food and family support
Let our enemies, let them see!

The better life for rural women. (96)

Fathead's speech at this celebration reflects the confidence tricks of the privileged elite class and the false logic of those who admire them and aspire to similar material accomplishments without the basic corollary of intellectual discernment.

'Koloko mma mma o! I salute you all. Our elders say that gbata gbata is a language that has two faces. It might mean good, it might mean disaster.' (98)

In this drama of social and communal acquiescence, tradition is made culprit, a situation heightened by Fathead's use of local wisdom in two proverbs, one being that 'gbata gbata is a language that has two faces; it might mean good, it might mean disaster' and the other asserting rather hypocritically 'it is from the home front that all training must take off...' with the English equivalent of 'charity begins at home...' Of course these are mere cheap rigmarole. The women folk who applaud him are unlike their modern enlightened liberated folks who acquiesce to the impoverishment of their nation state so long as it carves for them a niche of the social table. We may later see some rising assertions in the younger generation represented by Tina and her mother, but only briefly.

The Koloko women of Fathead's generation, through their songs and dances, are active connivers in a degenerating social order. Their songs betray the subversion of art for mere toadying in personal indulgence. To support Fathead's self-dominant dialogue, the women improvise a song from an Anglican hymn. We are shown an admixture of spiritual irreverence from poor syncretisms of traditional and Christian religious worship:

The millionaire cometh
Lo all eyes have seen him
And they say verily verily
The millionaire cometh!!!(101)

Both cases, particularly the latter, are inversions of their intended meaning. With communal epithets and witticism, Fathead justifies extravagant lifestyles and social ceremony -actions that are the bane of real progress. The society applauds in another intent, as long as they are participants of the crumbs of the table. In their haste to satisfy their palate, even custom can be thrown overboard.

'Now how do we begin?' Maika the palm wine seller asked. 'A hungry man does not waste the time on proverbs when the real meal is before him. De Tom what do you say?' (101).

In the social dramatic, cheap and vulgar wit interact freely.

'Hey be careful how you cut the meat... like you don't have any bone in your wrist. See...see that one.'

...

'Whose name does he bear?' someone followed.

'Don't you mind these young boys of the end age.'

'No manhood in between, and no bones.'

'It's too much mischief with the girls.'

'Ha! Ha! Ha! (101)

Koloko is a sinking society for sure. The degeneracy of any society is complete when it never questions but accepts all that is thrown at it in its craving for indulgence, much like contemporary American culture. And this is the dramatic thrust of Chin Ce's

narrative: the bane of the children of Koloko (read Africa).

Transition and Dialogue (*Gamji College*)

Gamji College (GC) begins on a staccato rhythm (GC 2) showcasing the dubious morality of the religions imported into Africa and embraced by an overwhelmed, uninformed and ignorant multitude. The story begins with a freshman's experience on his first day at school. Tai on arrival is beset by a proselyte band whose interest in his welfare is mere pretension. It strikes the new comer that the new friends foisting themselves on him are like the local politicians represented by president Baba Sonja who do not keep their words.

James was not quite true to his words, Tai noted with a sense of disrelish. He had come at just half past six while the arrangement was for seven. Tai was just preparing to go for dinner with another roommate called Pablo. Pablo had just checked in a few minutes ago. He was in his second year and they were just beginning to make friends. To James Tai said, 'Oh you're here,' and he tried to avoid a grimace, managing a wan smile instead.

'Yes, I can see you are ready.'

Whoever said he was ready? Tai hadn't said anything to that effect...(GC 11)

The final dismissal of these unwanted elements is also the rejection of the politics of impoverishment and deceit represented in the persons of college rector Dr. Jeze and his uncle the 'born-again' president Baba Sonja. More importantly the imported religion is equally thrown aboard.

“You must experience God!” James warned, his desperation sounded like a drowning man's last momentous effort to hold on to a straw.

“And who is to give me the experience?” Tai snorted with derision, “Brother Rimi?” he laughed mirthlessly. “Or Leader Obu? Oh, what of President Sonja and his ugly paunch? Now gentlemen, James and Rock-of-Peter or is it Peter-the-Rock? Please leave me. You are really being a nuisance interrupting my sleep,” he pointed gently to the door.(34)

In 'The Bottle' the second part of *Gamji College* fiction, we are not deceived by the rowdy boisterous company that Dogo, Femi and Milord (which in Koloko may also read Yoyo, Dickie and Buff). Chin Ce's tripartite characters are metonymical of the tripod on which the Nigerian nation is said to rest, representing the three major ethnicities that had dominated the country's political scene since independence to no apparent benefit. However, the three part characters here also present Chin Ce's three way resolution of the past present and future more clearly illustrated in *The Visitor*, his third work of fiction.

The entire racy banter suggests the juvenile delinquency of the Nigerian youth on the surface. Underneath there are currents of restiveness seen later in today's threat to Nigeria's corporate existence by youths of the Niger Delta. Chin Ce clearly foresees this restiveness in the queries and exchanges of Dogo, Milord and Femi.

'Until you are carried back in a stretcher,' Milord retorted.

'Of course, what better VIP treatment? And I won't miss the sirens. No governor in this country ever rides the streets of the town without sirens.'

'I can get you one,' Dogo offered, 'the noisiest siren the bloodiest dictator never had.'

'Great then that's the making of a president. One secret pals, those guys are drunk or doped all the time. That's their courage to face the crowd...with all those lies.'

'And to sneak out at night to see their girlfriends...'

'And their harem,' Milord peered at Dogo.

'Talk about harem.' (55)

The youths of Nigeria had long lost faith in the leadership which offers nothing but self aggrandisement and self indulgence. Similarly the youths, lacking a credible model offer, no reliable alternative as events following the campus elections clearly testify. Napoleon, late entrant for Gamji College union presidency, is part of the thuggery and rigging that characterise elections in Nigeria. Napoleon proposes an incredibly reactionary political alternative:

'You take one step back to make two steps forward. Being a neutral for once is like that, but in this case, I manipulate it to divert the votes to me. I win, and it is victory for the revolution. Actually my comrade Yusuf derailed when he allowed his tribesmen to hijack his manifesto and that's when I decided to come in... Just come and see me deliver my manifesto,' he boasted.

'And if you fail?'

'Never,' Napoleon spat. 'No politician ever contemplates failure in this business. I'm already the chief executive of Gamji union government, and if all fails,' he made one deft movement of his right hand behind his back and fished out a pistol. 'This doesn't.' (82)

His reliance on his gun as a last alternative to fetch him victory is as misguided as the morality of successive national elections in

the country which has been to rule by any means necessary and die in office.

It comes as no surprise that the union elections like all Nigerian elections end in chaos and violence. The only real candidate whose manifesto appears to make sense is killed presumably by Napoleons' gun.

Transition and Return of the Prodigal (COK)

Again we must return to the book *Children of Koloko* to complete the metamorphosis of individual consciousness in a transitional society. In 'Return to Koloko,' Yoyo confesses earnestly,

'Six years and I was now a man. My CV was quite impressive. I had finished college, did a stint of press work, joined defence academy, and deserted. In a few months I hoped to find my professional bearing though I knew not what at present...'(COK 121)

Here dream, dialogue, and song are employed to depict changing attitudes in the consciousness of the young hero. In six years of transition Yoyo had run his wit's end at various jobs—including fatherhood—and here he is a reluctant returnee. Earlier determined on a course of total self-exile, he had never wanted to set foot on his home town any more but the strong pull to be present at grand dad's funeral reveals a quality of loyalty and citizenship in the young hero.

Yoyo's dream entries had presaged the passage of the old grand parents signifying a passage of a generation. Dream recording is significant of a rising awareness of himself and the dialogue in this section is no longer lengthy for young Yoyo had other thoughts to

occupy him.

Ham drove roughly and jerkily. 'I am just coming from your compound, your old Bap's wake keeping is tonight,' he told me sanguinely.

'Is that so?' I now knew where he had had his drink.

'Oh, you didn't know this?' he remarked, a little surprised at my ignorance. I explained. 'I got Mam's letter and I thought so.'

'That's tomorrow. Tonight is the keeping awake for all night,' and he proceeded to chatter through the rest of the journey but my attention was somewhere else.(COK 134)

Goodman has also changed. He now wears 'a distant contemplative expression on his face' in fulfilment of Old Bap's injunction to go into 'studied contemplation' for the rest of his life. Bap shows 'a tacit note of comprehension' towards Yoyo. The circumstance of the changing awareness may be old Bap's transition. Yoyo was not present at the funeral of Kata and Big Mam. Thus Old Bap's which he witnesses is rendered in poetic sympathy: 'Thus draped in this still silent depth of profundity, my grand dad slept. (135)'

The songs of the preceding events have paled in comparison with the funeral songs; they now carry a sombre reverence as against the comic irreverence of the earlier ones, probably due to the occasion of death.

But unlike the biblical prodigal son, Yoyo's return is not permanent. Yoyo is leaving town the next day after the burial. The suggestion of continuity is made poignant in the dialogue with the old breed who angle for a second burial suggesting attachment to the old values and ways of life. Yoyo tells Mabelle:

The burial is over now, ...I mean Old Bap is buried, and that's more important (than a merely ceremonial and economically wasteful second burial) (146)

Yoyo is thinking he should be getting back to (his) own life and more especially back to (his) child and her mother....(146).

A new attitude of introspective cognition (thought/memory) rather than the interactive sessions (dialogue) emerges from the discourse of the old breed and two young members of the new generation, being Yoyo and Dora. Dora avoids everyone's eyes with 'placid disinterest.' The narrator remarks that her capacity to retain her opinions to herself, which surpassed that of the Virgin Mary, had given him a clue as to the new attitude of goodwill he must show his people. It is not the critical, deprecatory attitude of past story narratives. It is the goodwill from a mutual parting of ways made smooth by the deeper level of understanding that had been foreshadowed in *An African Eclipse*.

I have chosen now the day is bright
(the shining light of
soul lights) the middle lonely route.(AE 3)

For young Yoyo it is a lonely route to an era devoted an understanding an acceptance of the onus of self-responsibility.

Time, Memory and Illusion (*The Visitor*)

The Visitor, described as actually Chin Ce's first work of fiction but third in his published series, takes an entirely new approach to modern story telling in Africa. It is a story in which three dimensions of existence affecting three principal players Erie, Mensa, and Deego interrelate continuously to create an

unbreakable thread and posit a statement on the continuation of individual responsibility over and above mere existential needs.

The philosophy behind the whole story seems to be predicated upon an Igbo traditional song a translation of the main part which appears before the story:

We are visitors upon this earth
This world is not our own
We have come but to a market place
Only to purchase and go home

It would be therefore correct to state that the story teller is here concerned with the individual's quest for wholeness (the search for purpose) signified in Erie's lost memory (TV 1). For the hero, the discovery of who he is, and what he was, spans three paradigms of awareness –the past, present and future earlier mentioned. Erie, Mensa, and Deego are therefore same individuals as are Zeta, Sena, and Sarah in Chin Ce's deliberate tripartite also signified in the three suns of Erin ancestral land.

The setting in the future (2040) comes to us in the end part of the story as an epilogue and we are surprised to realise the whole story may have been cut from a movie which the viewer Deego had watched the night before he dozes off into an entirely strange adventure of a past dimension of reality.

The movie scenes apparently trigger some series of experiences which draw back to a past history of crime and death featuring Mensa in 1994. In this Nigerian city called Aja, a cult mentality permeates the society and the youths have lost their sense of values.

Yet this past is integrated within another world (Erin land) of an advanced line of kinsmen who live up to their roles as healers and teachers of the race. Mensa now called Erie in the land of his ancestors must go back and retrieve his memory lost from the gun

blast that took his life on earth.

Mensa is the product of the herd syndrome and violence that riddle the nation and threaten to destroy its entire fabric of existence. Unlike Yoyo, he never graduates from college. His drop out of school is the natural consequence of his denial of creative and positive existence, and added with his misguided involvement in the quest of revenge, Mensa's destruction appears a foregone conclusion.

The 1994 story of Mensa is seen partly through his narrative consciousness and through the omniscient narrative point of view to embrace a world of police corruption and decadence in Nigeria, a country drowning in its own degenerate materialism. All it offers may just be frustration and disappointment at all levels, a frustration that permeates Mensa's efforts and dogs all his noxious attempts at identity through cult power.

Ironi alone of all the others enjoyed tacit state patronage and confidence. It warmed his heart to know then that the minister of petroleum was one of the financiers of the club. Thus even as a job seeker Ironi connection guaranteed a niche among the notables of the society in which he had sought social acceptance, if only he could work hard enough in service to earn his cut and launch himself into wealth and power!

How could it have been otherwise? Better put, why did it become otherwise now? (TV 40)

In contrast to this world is Erin, the land of the ancestors as a present reality. Chin Ce's entry into the subjective universe of ancestral interactivity offers a unique perspective on contemporaneous and simultaneous levels of existence. Surprisingly in this world of the ancestors is a highly advanced city,

where even the memory of the individual members of the race can be retrieved and preserved for healing purposes or for posterity. The ancestral universe is thus not unlike the parallel worlds of modern science fiction where the author must have drawn his influence. But the idyllic representation of this world of ancestors as custodian of the African heritage is a product of a conscious artiste who wishes to consolidate the belief in the potential of a race through the emergence of a progeny who will eventually take charge of the transcendent qualities of heritage.

Thus Mensa now as Erin is seen living another existence in Erin City –a temporary existence that offers recovery from the modernist adventurism of his physical life.

It plagued him daily to walk about the walls of the city like some disembodied entity, a ghost whose only memory of his identity comes in flashes and hunches. 'You are at home among your spirits,' Zeta's granddad told him. 'But you will not understand, and it were better you did not ask too much questions. Take those daydreams, visions and nightmares as natural as the colour of your tan, things which will continue to hold little value to you until you come to face your past in order to know the moment (22)

This spiritual universe comes in grasps or strains of recollection where time is of a different scale and values are quite unlike those of the material plane. Thus the process of healing may take some time not only for Erie but for the whole society afflicted by the plague of displacement and lack of sympathy.

The city of his fathers looked all strange to him. Broad cleanly swept roads and walkways. All so real too. But then reality he had now learnt was a relative thing. He

couldn't believe he had lived here for seven years, seven good years that seemed like seven hundred years in earth's span and still no concrete or tangible evidence of who he truly was (22)

Finally the time comes, almost too soon, for Erie to withdraw from this idealised world of communal empathy to face the full details of his actions as Mensa on the physical terrain. The rest of the story moves quickly leading to the summation of characters in the story and their relationship with one another.

Important characters in this part include Sena and Omo, both allies of Mensa in the robbery and search for vengeance. The deaths of the characters come in swift ironic successions both allies dying by the hand of their friend Mensa, and Mensa finally falling to summary execution by armed militia men by which the Nigerian society, where the setting is derived, is sorely notorious for. In the replay of the death experience, Mensa's memory is transferred to Erie who now metamorphoses in Erin City with a wider perspective of his part in the rhythm of life. Erie discovers that Zeta (Sena) has been there all the time and both of them must continue the quest for further understanding of themselves and their lives' purpose.

The Visitor is a blend of the subjective consciousness in a serious quest for identity. True to opinion (TV1), it will remain a serious challenge to the traditional view of time and reality as a linear or progressive sequence of events. This is a major attribute of Chin Ce's oeuvres. His approach to fiction in Africa may appear to hold some significance beyond the ordinary and subjective perspective of social reality. In comparison to Lawrence's idea of art as assisting in the living of life to the fullest (*Sons xvii*), Chin Ce's cyclic universe of memory, transition and dialogue

undoubtedly presents a far deeper conception of art, and of life, that centres on the individual's perception of his unique position in society.

NOTES

¹ In its introduction, it is stated that *Gamji College* 'is the same tragedy of misplaced values, directionlessness and exhibition of political charisma bred on the stable of ethnic chauvinism that we have seen in *Children of Koloko*.'

² In *The Trouble with Nigeria* Chinua Achebe states mater-of-factly that 'the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely' a failure of leadership, a point which Chin Ce corroborates in entirety in "Bards and Tyrants" (ALJ B5 2005).

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